



Frequently Asked Questions

SEWAGE

What is SEWAGE?

The term 'sewage' describes raw sewage, sewage sludge, or septic tank waste. Raw sewage is mainly water containing excrement, industrial release and debris such as sanitary towels, condoms and plastic.

Excrement is the major source of harmful microorganisms, including bacteria, viruses and parasites. Sewage treatment reduces the water content and removes debris, but does not kill or remove all the microorganisms.

What is a sewage spill?

Sewage spills occur when the wastewater being transported via underground pipes overflows through a manhole, cleanout or broken pipe. Sewage spills cause health hazards, damage homes and businesses, and threaten the environment, local waterways and beaches.

Septic system failure can also result in exposure to sewage. Improper homeowner maintenance is the most common reason for septic system failure. Poorly maintained systems that are not pumped out regularly have sludge (solid material) build-up inside the septic tank. Sewage then flows into the absorption field, clogging it beyond repair. Heavy rains can saturate septic fields, causing systems to overflow and fail.

How can people be exposed to sewage?

People are exposed to sewage by hand-to-mouth contact during eating, drinking and smoking, or by wiping the face with contaminated hands or gloves. Exposure can also occur by skin contact, through cuts, scratches, or penetrating wounds, and from discarded hypodermic needles. Certain organisms can enter the body through the surfaces of the eyes, nose and mouth and by breathing them in, as dust, aerosol or mist.

How can sewage affect my health?

Sewage and wastewater contain bacteria, fungi, parasites, and viruses that can cause intestinal, lung, and other infections. Bacteria may cause diarrhea, fever, cramps, and sometimes vomiting, headache, weakness, or loss of appetite. These are some bacteria and diseases they cause: *E. coli*, shigellosis, typhoid fever, salmonella, and cholera.

Fungi such as *Aspergillus* and other fungi often grow in compost. These can lead to allergic symptoms (such as runny nose) and sometimes can lead to lung infection or make asthma worse. If you have other health problems, you may be more likely to get sick from exposure to *Aspergillus*.

Parasites including *Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia lamblia* may cause diarrhea and stomach cramps, and even nausea or a slight fever. Most people have no symptoms to roundworm (*Ascariasis*). Roundworms cause coughing, trouble breathing and/or pain in your belly and blocked intestines.

Viruses such as Hepatitis A cause liver disease. Symptoms of Hepatitis A are feeling tired, having pain in your belly, being nauseous, having jaundice (yellow skin), having diarrhea, or not being hungry. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says sewage workers are not at more risk of Hepatitis A infection than other workers. If many people in your community have Hepatitis A, your risk may be higher than usual.



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What should I do if exposed to sewage?

- Most important: Wash your hands well with clean water and soap before you eat or smoke and after working.
- Do not touch your nose, mouth, eyes, or ears with your hands, unless you have just washed. Most of the time, people get these diseases when they have germs on their hands and they touch their mouth, nose or eyes.
- Keep your fingernails short. Use a stiff soapy brush to clean under your nails.
- Wear waterproof gloves if you handle wastewater, sludge or grit, or if you clean pumps or screens.
- Shower and change out of any contaminated clothing.
- Do not keep your soiled work clothes with your other clothes.
- Report any injury or illness you think you got from sewage right away.
- You may need up-to-date shots for tetanus and diphtheria. If you want to know about shots to prevent Hepatitis A, ask a nurse or doctor.

References and Sources

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